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Build Back Better For All

By U.S. Representative Ed Case

I reject the hyper-division and disinformation which would hijack President Joe Biden's Build Back Better agenda into a death struggle between two extremes: one demanding a massive increase in the size, scope and expense of federal government regardless of need and resources; and the other demanding a massive reduction regardless of need and consequences.

We can and must achieve transformative change that targets critical needs without crippling our social, economic and financial foundations.

As proposed, Build Back Better (BBB) is two separate initiatives: (a) the American Jobs Plan (AJP), a multitrillion-dollar reinvestment in our nation's crumbling physical infrastructure, from roads, waterlines, ports and airports, to schools, broadband and climate resiliency; and (b) the American Families Plan (AFP), with massive federal programs from health care to child care, education, family and sick leave and further climate change initiatives, billed at \$3.5 trillion, but actually \$5-6 trillion through a standard 10-year budget.

We consider BBB amidst great need and uncertainty along with severe deterioration in our federal finances. In just 20 months, our federal government has spent some \$6 trillion (four years of usual federal spending) in critical COVID-19 emergency assistance. That was all borrowed, resulting in our largest deficits and debt ever, both absolute and as a percentage of our economy.

In August, the U.S. Senate overcame division and passed a bipartisan AJP. At more than \$1 trillion, it would be the largest infrastructure reinvestment in our history. It is largely paid for with revenues, meaning it won't worsen our federal finances. It would create some 2 million jobs

nationally and send more than \$2 billion to our Hawaii. It is widely supported across our country on its merits and as proof that our dysfunctional government can still work. I fully support it, and have done everything I can to get it passed by our U.S. House as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, it has been held hostage as “leverage” against passage of the AFP (or “reconciliation”). I strongly disagree with this approach because (a) we should pass what we can now and get money out, people to work and our infrastructure fixed; (b) reconciliation should and can pass on its own; and (c) delay risks the entire BBB agenda.

I support much of AFP/reconciliation. Like the president, House speaker and others, I believe that, except for climate change which commands urgent action, we cannot pay for huge programs by further federal borrowings. I also believe that we cannot tax excessively. To do either will be to (1) fail these and other critical programs over time; (2) worsen inflation (already at a 13-year high); (3) undermine our economy, jobs and revenues; and (4) limit our ability to meet other unexpected challenges. But we can still achieve a largest-in-our-history social infrastructure investment by reversing the Trump-administration tax cuts on corporations and wealthy individuals, cracking down on prescription drug prices, and other fair revenue generators, all of which I support.

The president now recognizes that the sweet spot, where real needs are met by reasonable revenues (and where reconciliation can actually pass Congress), is around \$2 trillion. That will require hard decisions on prioritizing among many worthy AFP proposals. My own guides are to (i) target fewer programs with the broadest impact over time; and (ii) target actual need rather than universal applications that benefit those with means at the expense of those in true need.

I am optimistic that, if and as we rise above anger and rhetoric and extremism and focus on actually governing, we will enact a Build Back Better agenda that will work for all Americans today and tomorrow.

Ed Case represents Hawaii's 1st Congressional District (urban Oahu) in the U.S. House.

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